

Testimony in Support of Raised Bill No. 896,
“An Act Concerning a Homeless Person’s Bill of Rights”

The Rev. Joshua Mason Pawelek
President, Greater Hartford Interfaith Coalition for Equity and Justice
Minister, Unitarian Universalist Society: East, Manchester, CT
March 15, 2013

Distinguished Members of the Public Health Committee:

I am the Rev. Josh Pawelek, minister of the Unitarian Universalist Society: East in Manchester, and President of the Greater Hartford Interfaith Coalition for Equity and Justice. Thank you for this opportunity to testify in support of Raised Bill No. 896, “An Act Concerning a Homeless Person’s Bill of Rights.”

I urge you to vote to establish a Homeless Person’s Bill of Rights in Connecticut. While all Connecticut residents’ basic rights are already guaranteed by the Connecticut and United States Constitutions, it is clear to me from my relationships with people experiencing homelessness in Manchester and Hartford that such guarantees are at best tenuous, and at times non-existent. Despite Constitutional guarantees, it remains far too easy for public and private institutions, their staff, and other representatives to both advertantly and inadvertantly ignore or deny the rights of people experiencing homelessness. Fifteen years into my ministry I’ve heard countless stories of homeless people encountering barriers to voting and registering to vote, receiving emergency medical care, obtaining employment, using public spaces, protecting personal property and information and, not surprisingly, gaining access to affordable housing.

Here’s the bottom line: Homeless people experience widespread discrimination in public life and seem to have little recourse to address that discrimination, especially in the moment it is happening. Establishing a Homeless Person’s Bill of Rights in our state is a powerful first step to changing this *status quo*.

In addition to my support for Raised Bill No. 896, I urge you to consider the suggested revisions presented by a new coalition called the Connecticut Homeless Human Rights Campaign. In my view, these recommendations are offered in a good faith effort to strengthen the bill, in essence to assert beyond the shadow of a doubt that people experiencing homelessness deserve full access to the rights afforded to all citizens. I have attached those suggested revisions to my written testimony which was submitted electronically on March 13th.

Thank You.

**SUGGESTED REVISIONS TO
RAISED BILL NO. 896
AN ACT CONCERNING A HOMELESS PERSON'S BILL OF RIGHTS
From the Connecticut Homeless Human Rights Campaign**

Suggested Revised Language for Section 1(a):

At the present time, many Connecticut residents continue to face the specter of homelessness due to the severe shortage of affordable housing, the impacts of economic hardship and economic downturn in our state, and a shrinking social safety net. Article 1, Section 1 of the Connecticut State Constitution states in part, that "All people when they form a social compact, are equal in rights." In line with this essential statement of the common law, it is reaffirmed that no person should have these rights compromised, face unequal treatment, or suffer unnecessarily due to discrimination based on his or her housing status. This section intends to address and prevent the continuation of these negative impacts to Connecticut residents who lack a permanent home.

(b) each homeless person in the state has the right to:

Suggested Revised Language for Section 1 (1) to (7).

- (1) Move freely and use public spaces including, but not limited to, public sidewalks, public parks, public transportation and public buildings, in the same manner as any other person, and without harassment or intimidation from law enforcement officers;
- (2) Equal opportunities for employment, and the right not to face discrimination while seeking or maintaining employment due to his or her lack of permanent mailing address, or his or her mailing address being that of a shelter or a social service provider;
- (3) Receive emergency medical care, free from discrimination based on his or her housing status;
- (4) Vote, register to vote and receive necessary documentation to prove identity for voting without discrimination due to his or her housing status. The Secretary of State shall provide voter registration identification cards, free of charge;
- (5) Have protection from disclosure of his or her records and information provided to homeless shelters and service providers to state, municipal, and private entities without appropriate legal authority; and the right to confidentiality of personal records and information in accordance with all limitations on disclosure established by the Federal Homeless Management Information System, Federal Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act, and the Federal Violence Against Women Act;
- (6) A reasonable expectation of privacy with his or her personal property to the same extent as personal property in a permanent residence;
- (7) Receive equal treatment by state and municipal agencies without discrimination based on housing status.